

triplets were nearly forgotten. Narrative emphasis shifts from one episode to the next, but the core characters remain the same.

2. Exposition. The constancy of the series' central figures means that each episode needs only a brief exposition. Most of the characters and their space are known to the viewer from previous episodes, and often they are reestablished in the program's theme song: for example, "Come and listen to my story about a man called Jed, a poor mountaineer, barely kept his family fed . . ." (*The Beverly Hillbillies* [1962–71]). Only the particulars of the current episode's characters and any new locations must be established. We rely upon the consistency of characters and space; it is part of what makes the show comfortable to watch. We know that every day in syndication the characters of *Friends* will congregate at the Central Perk coffee house, and that Andy Taylor (Andy Griffith) and Barney Fife (Don Notts) will preside over their jail (*The Andy Griffith Show* [1960–68]). Only new characters and new locations need be established in the exposition. Obviously, this is different from a one-time presentation such as a MOW, which must acquaint the viewer with an unknown cast of characters and an unfamiliar setting.

Series characters have a personal history of which we are usually conscious and to which references are occasionally made. On most series programs, however, these personal histories are rather vague and ill defined. The past is a murky region in series television. The present tense of a specific episode is usually all that matters. In the 1986–87 season of *Miami Vice*, detective Larry Zito (John Diehl) was murdered — a narrative event important enough to warrant a two-episode story. Subsequent episodes of the program, however, seldom mentioned Zito. That segment of the program's past virtually ceased to exist, except in reruns. Thus, series characters do have an established past, and their characters do not need reestablishing each week; but they often misplace this past and, in any event, it is usually not necessary for our enjoyment of a specific episode for us to know the details of the characters' pasts.

If we examine a specific episode of *Friends*, we can see how series narrative is structured and how it is being blended with the serial structure discussed in detail below. In "The One with Chandler's Work Laugh" (21 January 1999), the exposition begins before the credits. In a short scene, Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) pumps Joey for more information about Monica (Courteney Cox) and Chandler (Matthew Perry) getting together (Figure 2.6). As she quizzes him, the viewer is provided with background information and one story arc for this episode is established. After the general program credits end, and while the credits for this specific episode are superimposed over the image, two more story arcs are begun: Ross announces that an ex-wife of his is getting married and expresses his frustration at being alone and Monica and Chandler attend an office party at which he kowtows to his boss and is heard doing his fake, "work laugh" (Figure 2.7).

Monica and Chandler's and Ross's stories are rooted in the past and depend upon viewer knowledge of previous episodes. Consequently, they qualify as serial-style storylines (see below). But the storyline based on



FIGURE 2.6 In the exposition of a *Friends* episode, Rachel asks Joey for key narrative information, which he cannot provide.

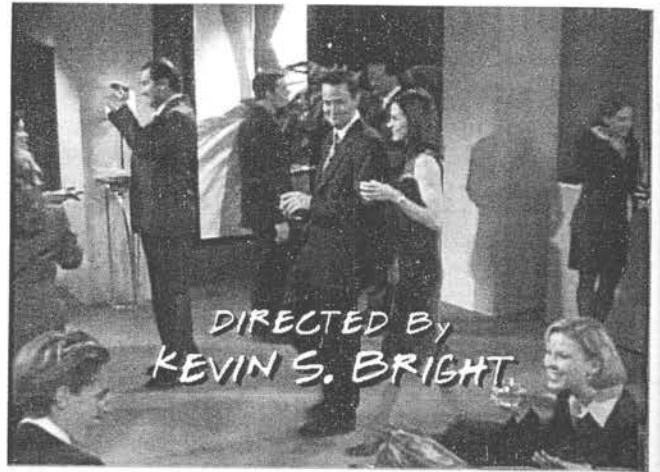


FIGURE 2.7 More *Friends* exposition: a secondary storyline develops between Monica and Chandler.

Chandler's work behavior, from which the episode takes its title, has only vague connections to *Friends'* narrative history. For the longest time, the series didn't even show Chandler at work so his behavior there has not been very important to the program. In this episode, however, it becomes a point of contention between him and Monica, with her criticizing the "work Chandler" as a "suck-up." Thus, the office-party scene serves as exposition for the storyline of Chandler's work behavior, which is woven into the storyline of Chandler and Monica's romance.

3. Motivation. The constancy of a series' characters and setting establishes a narrative equilibrium. A state of balance or rest exists at the beginning of each episode. However, if this balance were to continue, there would be no story. Something needs to disturb the balance to set the story in motion, to catalyze it.

The most common narrative catalyst, as in the classical cinema, is the lack or desire of the protagonist. Since the series incorporates multiple protagonists, this permits it to shift the narrative-catalyst function from one character to another. The desire of one protagonist may dominate one week; the desire of another may arise in the next episode. In "Chandler's Work Laugh," several characters have desires which motivate the narrative: Will Rachel discover Monica and Chandler's secret romance, and will that affect their friendship? Will Monica continue to love Chandler—despite his "suck-up" demeanor around his boss? Will Ross find true romance? Each lack (of the truth, of commitment in a relationship, of romance) raises the question of whether the protagonist's desire will be satisfied. In short, each raises a narrative enigma.

4. Narrative problematic. Questions such as the above underpin the narrative of a series and capture our attention (if they are successful). But, of course, as in all narrative forms these enigmas must not be immediately resolved. There must be a counterforce that prevents their instantaneous resolution, or there would be no story to tell. In the *Friends* example,

there are several counterforces. Monica functions as the **antagonist** for Rachel's desire for the truth—lying to her and concealing the relationship. Chandler's boss and his behavior around the boss are counterforces to Monica's commitment to him. And Janice (Maggie Wheeler)—an ill-suited date for Ross—delays his attainment of love. As with the classical film, the counterforce need not be a single individual. It may also be the protagonist's environment or an internal, psychological element within the protagonist. The main point is that protagonists' acquisition of their goals must be postponed, deferred, so that the narrative may develop further complications.

Thus, the narrative focus shifts from one week to the next, but it is important to recognize that these individual desires and enigmas exist within a larger **narrative problematic**. Because fundamentally the series is a repeatable form, there must be some narrative kernel that recurs every week. In effect, the program must ask the same question again and again to maintain consistency and viewer interest. Of course, we wouldn't watch exactly the same material each week (although the number of times we watch a particular episode in syndication contradicts this), so there must be some variation within that consistency. But, still, every series must have some recurring problematic, some dilemma with which it deals in every episode.

For *Friends* the on-going dilemma revolves around issues confronting friends in their twenties—just out of college, but not yet fully settled into a career. We might think of that dilemma as, Will the friends' camaraderie be disrupted? That is, will the friends stop being friends? Related questions include: Will Chandler/Joey/Monica/Phoebe/Ross find romance? Will Chandler/Joey/Monica/Phoebe/Ross find fulfilling work? Almost every week the program tests the bond among these six friends. To take another example—this time from a police drama—the problematic of *Miami Vice* is: Will Crockett and/or Tubbs surrender to the temptations they are immersed in and become villains? Individual episodes counterpose various antagonists against Crockett and Tubbs, but overriding these specific concerns is the more general issue of their moral character.

Each episode, drawing on the multiplicity of protagonists in series TV, poses a slightly different narrative enigma. As John Ellis has noted, "The basic problematic of the series, with all its conflicts, is itself a stable state."¹⁰ Specific enigmas come and go—briefly igniting the viewer's interest—but the fundamental problematic remains firm, sustaining the viewer's ongoing attachment to the program. The particulars of Ross and Janice's situation and Chandler's work laugh were the embodiment of the program's underlying problematic on 21 January 1999. In the following week's episode, these particulars disappeared, but the program's problematic returned. In sum, most series have a single, stable narrative problematic, which is embodied in numerous, different narrative enigmas on a week-to-week basis.

5. Cause-effect chain. As in the classical film, events do not happen randomly in series television. One scene leads into the next, and the next, and the next. A cause-effect chain is erected scene by scene. However, this chain must be broken at least once during a half-hour program, and at

least three times during an hour-long program, for the insertion of commercials. The TV chain is not continuous as it is in the cinema.

The series deals with this discontinuity by segmenting the narrative. That is, the story is broken into segments that fit between the commercial breaks. These between-commercial segments, sometimes called **acts**, consist of one or more scenes that hold together as strongly as classical scenes do. They end with their own small climax, which leads into the commercial break. The function of this pre-commercial climax is not to resolve narrative dilemmas, but instead to heighten them, to raise our interest in the narrative as we flow into the commercials. New, minor enigmas may even be posed just before the segment ends.

In "Chandler's Work Laugh," for example, Ross is despondent about his failed marriage to Emily. As act one ends, Monica, Joey, Rachel and Phoebe quiz him about being out all night. He is evading their questions when Janice enters the room—revealing that Ross was with her. As the segment fades to black with a shot of an embarrassed Ross (Figure 2.8), the viewer is left with an enigma: Were Ross and Janice romantically involved in the night before? Following the commercials, this question is answered in the very first scene (yes, they were) and the narrative chain resumes (Figure 2.9, the first shot after the break).

In sum, the segmentation of the series narrative interrupts the rising curve of increasingly intensified action that we see in classical cinema and replaces it with portions of narrative equipped with their own miniature climax—in a sense, several upward curves linked together. In this way, television narrative more closely resembles the play, with its division into separate acts, or the mystery novel that ends each chapter on a note of suspense. The chain is slightly ruptured, but not sundered by the so-called commercial breaks.

6. Climax. Series episodes do have a final climax, where the action finally peaks and asks for some form of resolution. In the final scene of "Chandler's Work Laugh," Ross's whining annoys Janice and she breaks

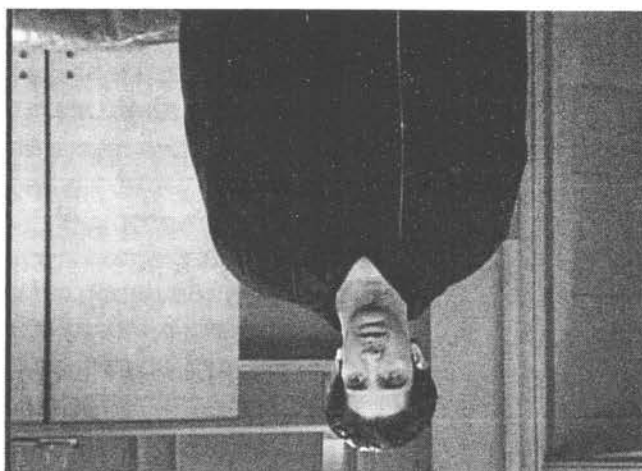


FIGURE 2.8 *Friends*: Ross looks guilty during the instant before a commercial break . . .



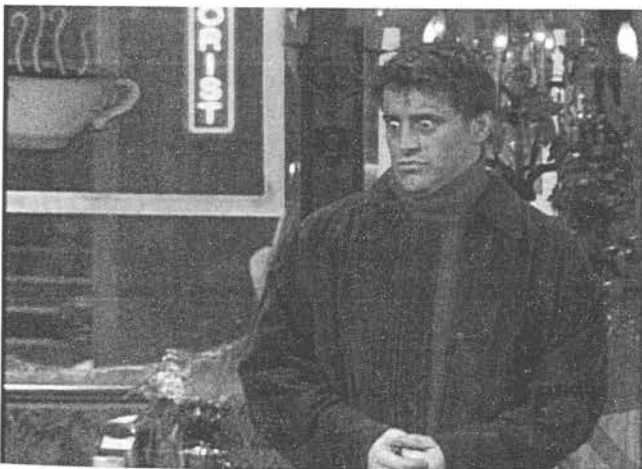
FIGURE 2.9 . . . and everyone stares at him during the instant right after it.

off their relationship. However, series programs' climaxes are undercut by one main factor: the repeatability of the program, its need to return the following week with the same problematic. The conflict reaches its peak, but there is no final resolution.

7. Resolution/denouement. Series episodes can have no final resolution, no narrative closure, because to do so would mean the end of the series itself. If there were no more threats to the friends' camaraderie, if they were all happily coupled up and satisfied with their jobs, or if the moral character of Crockett and Tubbs were assured, there would be no more conflict upon which to base *Friends*' and *Miami Vice*'s narratives. Consequently, the ending of each episode must leave us in doubt as to the ultimate resolution of the series' overarching conflict. There must be a sense of narrative openness, a limited aperture. In "Chandler's Work Laugh," we learn that Ross and Janice's relationship is over, but we don't know about Ross' future romances or the possibility of Janice reappearing on the show. The small question: "Will Ross find romance with Janice?" is answered. Larger questions such as "Will Ross *ever* find romance?" or "Will romance and marriage take him away from his friends?" are not fully resolved. The last shot of the episode shows Janice teasing Joey, the one male "friend" with whom she has not slept, that he might be next (Figure 2.10, final shot before the end credits). And so future complications are already being seeded.

On rare occasions, television series will conclude the program's run by providing true narrative closure. *M*A*S*H* ended the fictional doctors' and nurses' conflict with the Korean War by presenting a two-and-a-half-hour episode (28 February 1983) of the war's end. With no more war to play antagonist to the medical protagonists, the narrative motor of the program ran out of fuel. Its repeatable problematic had finally been resolved — after 11 years and hundreds of episodes.

Most series, however, do not close in this fashion. One moment they are part of the weekly schedule and the next they are gone. Their abrupt departure sustains their narrative aperture, which is helpful if they are



Friends: The final shot before the end credits opens the possibility of a union between Joey and Janice.

sold into stripped syndication, where their problematic is *re-presented* daily. When *Friends* concluded its ten-year run with a two-part finale — titled, significantly, “The Last One” (6 May 2004) — it parceled out some closure by resolving long-running storylines such as Ross and Rachel’s on-again-off-again romance, but it still left some storylines unresolved. Notably, Joey’s future was left open so that he might move to Los Angeles, where the character’s “life” could continue to be chronicled in a new sitcom ([*Joey* 2004–2006]).

The Television Serial

The serial is another form of storytelling that successfully made the transition from radio to television. Even before radio made use of the serial, there were examples of it in literature and the cinema. Nineteenth-century novels, such as those by Charles Dickens, were often originally published chapter by chapter in magazines. Silent movie serials such as the hugely popular *Fantomas* (1913) in France and *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) in the United States entertained audiences during radio’s infancy. Neither of these forms, however, would reach an audience as enormous as the TV serial’s. Unlike the *series*, the *serial* expects us to make specific and substantial narrative connections between one episode and the next. In the *series*, the link between each week’s programs is rather vague. In the *serial*, the connection is fundamental to its narrative pleasures. The main difference between the *series* and the *serial* is the way that each handles the development of the narrative from episode to episode.

In years past, the *serial*, in the form of the soap opera, dominated daytime television, but had little impact upon prime-time schedules — with the significant exceptions of *Dallas* (1978–91) and *Dynasty* (1981–89). But the late 1990s and early 2000s have seen a surge in popularity of the *serial*. *Twin Peaks* (1990–91), a favorite of critics, and ratings champion *ER* (1994–) led the way and have been followed by 24 (2001–), *Desperate Housewives*, *Lost*, *Prison Break* and *Grey’s Anatomy* — not to mention well-regarded serials such as *The Sopranos* (1999–) and *Deadwood* (2004–), which were produced for premium channels.

The television *serial* used to be the least respected narrative form. There was a creeping sexism in this attitude, for it assumed that soap opera and *serial* story-telling was something that only “housewives” could find interesting. The wealth of prime-time *serials* and the blurring of the distinction between *serial* and *series* have proven that the form may be used to create sophisticated and quirky television. Consequently, it is important to examine how it is that *serials* tell their stories. What is their narrative structure, and how does it differ from both the classical cinema and the television *series*? In the discussion that follows, we will focus on the daytime *serial*, the soap opera, because it is the purest, most extreme example of *serial* television, but most of our generalizations about it apply in varying degrees to the prime-time *serials*.

Narrative Structure

1. Multiple protagonists. In our discussion of series programs, we noted an increased tendency toward multiple protagonists. The serial—especially the daytime serial—uses an even larger number of protagonists, each of whom is equally important to the narrative structure. Hour-long soap operas typically have 15 to 20 central characters—many more than the classical film, and even more than multiple-protagonist series such as *Friends* (whose main characters number just six). Soap-opera casts are the largest of any program on television—including most prime-time serials.

The multiplicity of protagonists permits a variety of simultaneous story lines within the narrative world of a serial. And, more importantly, the high number of characters decreases the importance of any one character. Indeed, soap-opera characters lead a precarious existence. They come and go with a swiftness that is uncommon in other fictional forms. This is due partly to economics. Most soap-opera actors work under contracts that may be cancelled every thirteen weeks. If the producers feel that an actors are not generating enough viewer interest, they may suddenly disappear, along with their characters (although characters are also frequently recast). However, economics is not the only reason for the large number of protagonists. Soap opera relies upon a multiplicity of characters to create a narrative web in which most characters are connected with one another.

2. Exposition. As does *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the television serial begins each episode *in medias res*. The story has already begun, the action joined in progress. On the episode of *All My Children* aired 6 December 2005, the first scene is Del (Alec Musser) and Babe (Alexa Havins) discussing her child-custody fight with J. R. (Jacob Young), while he (J. R.) eavesdrops on the two of them. In fact, the very first shot is of the eaves-

Sidebar 2.1 Plot Recap

The plot recap for the 6 December 2005 episode of *All My Children*, as published on its official Web site, indicates that no less than 16 central characters are involved in this one episode's events:

Kendall suspects either Greenlee or Jonathan left her in the hammock but Ryan feels Zach could be responsible. Meanwhile, Julia and Aidan try to stop Zach's attack on Jonathan. Lily becomes very agitated to see Zach pummeling Jonathan. Zach apologizes to Lily. Jonathan doesn't tell Ryan about Zach's attack. Kendall admits to Ryan she doesn't feel as though she's ready to be a mother. Ryan tells Kendall he will support any decision she makes regarding the baby. Di succeeds in getting Greg to hire her as his new receptionist. Tad decides to trust Di and use her as a spy in Greg's office. Tad explains to Di that he found a file on the Martin family in Greg's closet. Tad is hit with a wave of emotion when Di covers herself with a blanket Dixie had made. Babe doesn't fall for JR's trap and cleverly turns the tables on him. Amanda tells Josh about her blackouts and fears what she might have done during them. Josh offers Amanda a job as his assistant at New Beginnings and deliberately gives her wrong information for a meeting she is to set up for Erica.¹¹

dropped, before any other context is established (Figure 2.11). The two men are working together in a scheme to set her up. We, the viewers, are dropped into the middle of a complicated storyline that has been running for months. The scene serves as episode-specific exposition by establishing characters and a location that will recur through this particular episode. The original exposition of *All My Children* began over thirty years ago when it was first broadcast (5 January 1970). The "lives" of its characters were initially constructed then and the story has been continuing ever since. Other soap operas' original expositions also date from decades ago. Similarly, *Guiding Light* has been developing its story on radio and television for more than 60 years – making its radio debut on 25 January 1937. If these were classical films they would have lasted thousands of hours and their exposition would have occurred years ago!

Few, if any, viewers have watched *Guiding Light* since its inception and to view every *All My Children* since 1970 would itself be quite a feat. Additionally, the programs are always adding new viewers. So how do serials cope with viewers who have missed episodes or are new to the program? The answer is that serials, particularly the long-running soap operas, contain a large quotient of redundant narrative information. Character A has coffee with character B and they discuss how C has fathered a child with D. This narrative fact is now established. But in a later scene (the next day, perhaps) we will see character B at the nurses' station discussing the situation with two more characters. The information is redundant to the regular viewer, but serves as exposition for the viewer that has missed the previous scene. A small example from the 6 December episode illustrates this. In the very last line of a scene between Ryan (Cameron Mathison) and the pregnant Kendall (Alicia Minshew), she challenges him saying, "I might not even have this child." Her first line following the commercials is the redundant, "I might terminate this pregnancy!" Through repetitions such as these the soap opera constantly re-establishes its characters and their situations.



FIGURE 2.11 The opening shot of an *All My Children* episode begins the program in the middle of the action; J. R. eavesdrops on two characters.

Part of the redundant information that is regurgitated in the serial is the pasts of the characters. Serial characters carry a specific, significant past—much more so than do the series characters. In the series, as we discussed above, the past is obscure and indefinite; but in the serial, characters constantly refer to it. Previous love affairs and marriages, murders and double-crossings, pregnancies and miscarriages, are layered on top of the current goings-on. For the regular viewer in particular this creates a remarkably dense, multilayered narrative. A casual remark between two characters can be loaded with repressed, unspoken associations. A kiss hello can signify years of ill will or unrequited lust. In the 6 December episode, Di (Kelli Giddish) becomes indignant about an injustice done to Tad (Michael E. Knight). He interrupts her and says, “In light of things that have happened between you and me, I would consider it a personal favor if you would try to stop acting like Dixie.” No further explanation is offered as to what those “things” might be. The regular viewer, however, knows that Tad is referring to Di’s attempt to pretend to be Dixie, Tad’s (seemingly) dead wife. So it is that a complex weave of character relationships exists from the very first second of a day’s episode of a daytime serial and extends back into decades of complicated, previously told storylines.

This is not to say that new characters are never introduced on serials. Obviously, they must be, to keep the narrative fresh and interesting. These characters all undergo a conventional exposition, as does a character entering a classical film. However, daytime soap operas commonly abbreviate this exposition by providing familial associations for the new character. Often, the new character will be someone’s never-before-seen cousin or uncle, or even sister or mother. The use of familial relations quickly incorporates new characters into the story lines associated with that family. This narrative tactic is illustrated by the character “bios” (biographies of the characters, written as if they were real people) on *All My Children*’s official Web site. Each of the biographies begins with the character’s complicated family connections. For example, the character of Di, who was introduced relatively recently, is situated thus:

Father: Seabone Hunkle

Siblings: Del Henry, Dixie Martin (half-sister; deceased), Will Cortlandt (half-brother; deceased), Melanie Cortlandt (half-sister; deceased)

Nephew: J.R. Chandler

Brother-in-law: David Rampal¹²

Her character is established as being similar to, or different from, the rest of the family’s overall character—particularly Dixie’s as she was pretending to be her.

3. Motivation. Like the exposition, the original catalyst for long-running television serials took place years ago. In the episodes we watch day after day, or week after week, the many protagonists’ desires and lacks are mostly already established. Only the occasional new desire/lack is

introduced to maintain the narrative diversity. In both daytime and nighttime serials, these lacks/desires normally concentrate on heterosexual romance and familial relations (especially paternity). Over the past three decades, however, the serial has diversified, with *Dallas* leading the serial into themes of corporate greed, and *General Hospital* (1963–) introducing international intrigue and science fiction (the “ice princess”) into the soap opera world. The 2000s has even seen political thrillers (24) and prison escapes (*Prison Break*) rendered in serial form.

4. Narrative enigma. The serial is saturated with enigmas. It thrives on them. The multiplicity of protagonists ensures that several – up to a dozen or so – enigmas will be running on any one program at any one time. On 6 December, *All My Children's* enigmas include:

- ▶ Will Kendall have her baby?
- ▶ Will Ryan and Kendall get together since she is carrying his child?
- ▶ Is Jonathan still a psychotic killer or has he been cured?
- ▶ Will Babe get custody of her baby from J. R?
- ▶ Will Krystal and Adam make their fake marriage a real one?
- ▶ Did Amanda attack Babe, pushing her down the stairs? And what evil is Janet, Amanda's mother, up to?

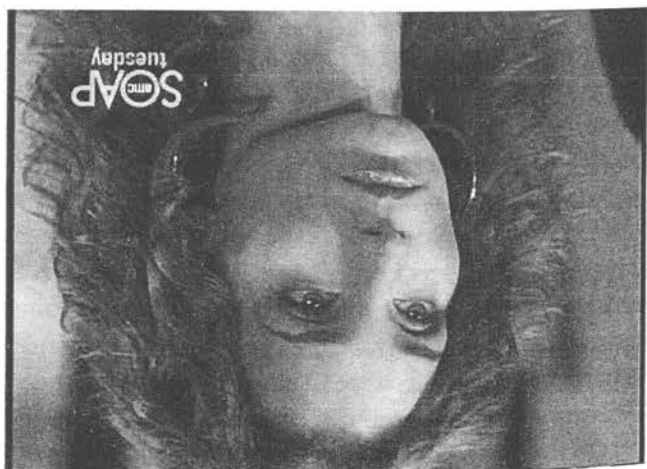
Unlike the classical film or the TV series episode with their one central enigma, the serial nurtures multiple enigmas. They are its foundation. The multiplicity of enigmas ensures that serials will never lose their narrative momentum. If one enigma is solved, many others still remain to slowly pull the story forward.

5. Cause-effect chain. The narrative chain of daytime serial television is interrupted more frequently than that of series television. There are more commercial breaks per program minute in daytime soap operas than there are in nighttime series. (It is no coincidence that soap operas are the most consistently profitable programs on television.) In an hour-long episode, almost 20 minutes are taken up with commercials and other non-narrative material. Indeed, barely nine or ten minutes of story material elapse between commercial interruptions.

Serials adapt to this constant interruption much the same way that series do. They segment the narrative. Each serial narrative segment ends with a small climax, which raises new enigmas rather than leading to resolutions. We enter, or “flow” into, a commercial break on the heels of a narrative question mark. Sometimes the break is preceded by a literal question, as in the 6 December episode when Ryan says to Kendall, “You are carrying my child. So, what the hell are we going to do about that?” The director, Angela Tessinari, ends the scene with a close-up of Kendall as this line is spoken (tight, scene-ending close-ups are a common convention of soap opera; Figure 2.12). Cut to commercial. After we return from the world of commerce, she provides an evasive answer to that question. Her



FIGURE 2.13 . . . and after the break she avoids providing a full answer.



All My Children: Kendall is framed in a tight close-up just before a commercial break. She has been asked what she will do about her controversial pregnancy . . .

first line of dialogue is: "You forget, you and I are not the 'we' I was planning on with this baby. It was supposed to be me and Greenlee [her friend and step-sister]" (Figure 2.13). The program has teased us into waiting through five minutes of commercials by promising an answer to Ryan's question. We don't really get one, however, and the overarching enigma is sustained. As we have seen in all the narrative structures on television, they operate principally by delaying answers to enigmas.

6. Climax. Eventually, individual story lines do climax on serials. If they didn't, we would probably stop watching out of total frustration. So we do have fairy-tale weddings in which long-separated lovers are united, and climactic gun battles in which evil characters are dispatched. But these climaxes never result in narrative resolution.

7. (The lack of) Resolution. Almost by definition, serials cannot have total resolution. If they did, there would be no reason to tune in the next day. Climaxes don't generate resolutions. They just create new enigmas. In characteristic fashion, the 6 December episode is dealing with the repercussions of a resolved storyline. For months, the program focused on a mysterious series of murders. Then, the mystery was solved: it was Jonathan that killed three people and what caused him to do so was a tumor pressing on his brain. Surgeons successfully removed the tumor—thereby both curing him and bringing the storyline to a conclusion. Or did it? Zach, the son of one of the murder victims, has turned to alcohol to ease the pain and he vows to kill Jonathan. Will he do so and/or will he get his life back in order? And is Jonathan truly cured, or is he just faking it? The attack on Kendall that begins the 6 December episode raises questions about Jonathan's rehabilitation. As is always the case in serials, the resolution of one storyline opens up new questions, new enigmas. Even death is not a certainty—as was illustrated by Bobby Ewing's return to *Dallas* after "dying" in front of Pam's eyes. (Apparently it was

just a dream of Pam's—a dream that lasted an entire TV season! And Jonathan, on *All My Children*, managed to return to the narrative after having been shot and having had a bomb he created explode, which caused a mining cave to collapse on top of him. Furthermore, many serial characters have returned from (presumed) death two and three times—as did James Stenbeck (Anthony Herrera) on *As the World Turns*. So even death is not a permanent resolution on the soap opera.

On the extremely rare occasions when a serial story line does achieve relative narrative closure—say, a couple marries and leaves the program—it is still of little consequence to the enigma structure of the program because of the abundance of other enigmas. The sixth season of *ER* ended with Carol (Julianne Margulies) joining Doug (George Clooney) in Seattle—the conclusion of a very rocky relationship spanning several years. (Since both actors left the show, it seems unlikely there will ever be further developments in their relationship.) But *ER* has no lack of ongoing enigmas (for example, Carter's [Noah Wyle] drug addiction and Benton's [Eriq La Salle] relationship with his son). With numerous protagonists, someone is certain to be lacking or desiring someone or something at any point in time on *ER* and other serials. The one imperative of the serial is that the story must continue.

In terms of individual episodes, the serial ends as it begins: in the middle of the action. The *All My Children* episode that begins in *medias res* in the child-custody storyline ends in the midst of the same storyline—with very little narrative development between start and finish. In the last shot of the day, Babe watches J.R. leave the boathouse, then grins at her success in turning the tables on him and Del. "Gotcha!" she says triumphantly to herself, concluding the day's episode (Figure 2.14). Her exclamation contains an implied tease: Will she trick J.R. and regain custody of their son? Tune in tomorrow to (perhaps) find out.



FIGURE 2.14 *All My Children*: The last shot of this episode provides no narrative resolution, as Babe plots further schemes.

Summary

Narrative forms must share television time with all sorts of other material: news, commercials, game shows, public service announcements. And yet, stories are what principally draw us to television. Theatrical films, made-for-TV films (MOWs), series programs, and serial programs lure us with the promise of entertaining stories. These television narratives share certain characteristics. They all present protagonists — established by an exposition — in a chain of events motivated by desire. There are always antagonists — individuals, environments, or internal — that prevent the attainment of that desire. The chain in each narrative mode is comprised of actions connected to one another by narrative enigmas that pull the story toward a climax. All of these aspects are necessary for conventional storytelling, though their order and emphasis may differ from mode to mode.

However, important distinctions separate the narrative modes. Series and serials rely upon a viewer foreknowledge of characters that is not possible in individual films, whether made for TV or not. The MOW, the series, and the serial adapt themselves to television's constant interruptions through narrative segmentation, to which theatrical films are not accustomed. Each mode handles enigmas and resolutions somewhat differently — depending upon whether the mode must be continued the next week/day or not. On one end of the spectrum is the classical film, with its firm narrative closure; on the other is the soap opera, with its never-fully-closing narrative aperture.

We should resist the impulse to use the classical film as our yardstick to measure these individual narrative modes. Instead, we should understand them on their own terms as television narratives. Every narrative form on TV must somehow conform to television's flow, interruption, and segmentation. The daytime serial — with its extreme segmentation, multiple protagonists, multiple enigmas, and lack of full resolution — owes the least to the classical film or the nineteenth century novel, and is perhaps the most televisual of the narrative modes. The theatrical film is, obviously, the least suited and consequently suffers the most. The series and the MOW each has its own way of accommodating the medium. And still, all are television stories.

Further Readings

The most cogent overview of television narrative, especially as it compares with the narrative of other related media, is John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video* (Boston: Routledge, 1992), although his references are becoming a bit dated. Another and more theoretical overview is provided by Sarah Kosloff's chapter, "Narrative Theory and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Kosloff includes an annotated bibliography of narrative theory of literature, film, and television. Nick Lacey, *Narrative and Genre: Key Concepts in Media Studies* (New York: Palmgrave,

2000) covers general principles of genre and then applies them to both television and film.

Analyses of the narrative structures of film and literature can often provide insights into those of television. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have written frequently on narrative systems in film. Their *Film Art: An Introduction*, 7th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003) offers chapters that summarize their work elsewhere. Thompson has addressed the specifics of television narrative in *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) is a meticulous analysis of the evolution of classical film narrative form as a mode of production. Edward Brannigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992) examines both narrative structure and our interpretation of it in film. Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978) provides a summary of narrative analysis in those two media.

Genre studies often focus on narrative—as can be seen in two TV-genre overviews: Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004) and Glen Creeber, ed., *The Television Genre Book* (London: British Film Institute, 2001). Using *Star Trek's* holodeck as a portent of the future, Janet H. Murray details the development of narrative in various formats of science fiction in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). Other discussions of specific television genres and formats include Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Paul Attallah, "The Unworthy Discourse: Situation Comedy in Television," in *Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives*, ed. Willard D. Rowland, Jr., and Bruce Watkins (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984); and Elayne Rapping, *The Movie of the Week: Private Stories, Public Events* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). Of course, television narratives do not exist in isolation from one another. Mimi White, in "Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television," *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1986):51–64, explains just how narratives may bounce off one another in television.

Notes

1. For an exhaustive consideration of classicism, see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

2. Source: "Domestic Grosses: Adjusted for Ticket Price Inflation," *Box Office Mojo*, 6 December 2005, www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm.

3. Each year, 25 films deemed "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant" are added to the National Film Registry, which works to preserve them. "National Film Registry," Library of Congress, 6 December 2005, www.loc.gov/film/filmnfr.html.

4. Lawrence Kasden, "Raiders of the Lost Ark," 6 December 2005, www.movie-page.com/scripts/Raiders-of-the-Lost-Ark.html.

5. "Film Victim of the Month," *Artists Rights Foundation* January 1999, 6 November 2000 www.artistsrights.org. The Artists Rights Foundation has been subsumed under the Film Foundation and its Website has changed to www.film-foundation.org.

6. Midnight Cowboy is so butchered when it is shown on television that Leonard Maltin advises, "... please don't watch it on commercial TV: the most lenient prints run 104 m. [out of an original running time of 113 minutes] and are ludicrously dubbed to remove foul language." *TV Movies and Video Guide* (New York: Signet, 1990), 719.

7. Maltin, 1081-1082.

8. Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows*, fourth edition (New York: Ballantine, 1988), 533-534.

9. "Top 25 Specials of All Time," *Media Info Center*, 6 December 2005, www.mediainfocenter.org/television/content/top25_nonsports.asp.

10. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema:Television:Video* (Boston: Routledge, 1992), 156.

11. "Recaps: 12/6/05," *All My Children*, 7 December 2005, abc.go.com/daytime/allmychildren/episodes/2005/1.html.

12. "Character Bios," *ABC*, 7 December 2005, abc.go.com/daytime/allmychildren/characters/87565_1.html.